

Department of Defense Bloggers Roundtable With Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force James A. Roy Subject: Portraits in Courage Time: 2:00 p.m. EDT Date: Tuesday, September 20, 2011

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LIEUTENANT TIFFANY WALKER (Office of the Secretary of Defense Public Affairs): (In progress) -- service before self.

A note to everyone today: Please remember to clearly state your name and blog or organization in advance of your question, and respect everyone's time and keep your questions succinct and to the point and on the subject of the "Portraits in Courage" magazine.

We've taken an opening statement. I'd like to know if anyone on the panel has anything that they'd like to lead with.

Go ahead.

CHIEF MASTER SERGEANT JAMES A. ROY: Yes, please do. Go ahead and start with your statements and opening story and tell a little bit about your particular portrait in courage.

SERGEANT DANIEL WARREN: Sure. My name is Staff Sergeant Daniel Warren from Patrick Air Force Base, Florida. I'm a pararescueman. And I was selected and honored to be selected in this "Portraits of Courage" for actions in February of 2010 along the Hindu Kush Mountains along the Salang Pass in Afghanistan.

We were there as part of a rescue effort and there was an avalanche -- a series of avalanches that took out hundreds of passersby and cars, burying them along with people, school buses, cars, et cetera, just stranding Afghanis on this very busy local thoroughfare, so we were called to extricate, triage, treat along this 11,000-foot pass and we were able to evacuate and essentially save 282 civilians off the side of the mountain on a pretty large-scale joint effort to recover these folks. And it was an honor to be a part of it. And that's my story.

MAJOR MATTHEW ASTROTH: Major Matthew Astroth from Hurlburt Field, Florida. I'm a AC-130U instructor pilot. I'm honored to be here to represent my crew for the -- (inaudible) -- put us in "Portraits in

Courage." We were engaged in a 12-hour firefight. It was an over 10-hour sortie in Afghanistan in the Kunar region, able to save almost all the guys on the ground and -- (inaudible).

SGT. ROY: Airman, please.

SENIOR AIRMAN CHANISE EPPS: My name is Senior Airman Chanise Epps. I'm from Beale Air Force Base, California. I'm a still photographer. And I am honored to be here as a photographer because we rarely get the -- (inaudible). My story is December 28th, 2010, my squad got attacked with small arms fire and mortar rounds. I didn't care about anything that was going on. I wanted to document the situation. I collected over 600 images that led to the capture of several detainees and actually it helped build the FOB up defense-wise.

SGT. ROY: Lieutenant Walker, are there any questions from the bloggers on the phone? And/or we could open it up to our reporters in the room.

LT. WALKER: Okay. Did anyone join us on the line? Okay.

We'll start with David Larter from Air Force Times.

Q: Thank you all for being here today and I appreciate it. (Inaudible) -- the -- when the FOB -- (inaudible) -- what was the name of the FOB, by the way?

AIRMAN EPPS: FOB -- (inaudible) -- in Afghanistan.

Q: Okay. What was it like for you being in that kind of -- that situation and with just a camera and doing your job in that sense?

AIRMAN EPPS: It was like an out-of-body experience, like you watch a movie and then you're actually in it. So you just do what's second nature, so all the training that I received actually made me go through with all the actions that I did because -- (inaudible). It was just second nature -- (inaudible).

Q: Was it confusing at that time?

AIRMAN EPPS: Oh, yes. Very. Very.

Q: So to paint the picture a little bit, who was attacking the FOB? Who was attacking the FOB, what was the (numbers ?) like? What kind of intelligence did your camera provide?

AIRMAN EPPS: Okay. So our FOB was attacked by the enemy. I don't know the name of the people. We were attacked during -- it was lunchtime. We were attacked with mortar rounds. We had RPG and we had small arms fire. And it was attacking the FOB and then I had my camera and I documented -- I documented from the beginning and it was a three-hour firefight. I documented from the beginning of the firefight all the way to the very last part of the firefight -- (inaudible). And my images led to the base to be rebuilt better with all the safety features that it

needed that it didn't have before. And they also used it -- (inaudible) -- S2, which is intelligence, and he used the photos to capture people.

Q: From a general standpoint, when we send photogs downrange to take pictures, we're looking for something compelling or like a certain image, but what are you looking for when you're, you know, behind the lens?

AIRMAN EPPS: When I was doing this, I was just trying to tell the story and I was -- I had to make sure I got everybody that was actually fighting the fight in a photo. So I made sure that everybody that was a part of the fight, that helped put out the fire, that helped aid with shovels, fire extinguishers, anything that anybody was doing to help, I made sure that I took a picture of them. And actually a lot of my photography was used for people to get awards too.

Q: But how many images altogether?

AIRMAN EPPS: Over 600 images.

Q: What kind of camera do you use?

AIRMAN EPPS: I used a D300 Nikon.

LT. WALKER: All right. Thank you. Tanya (sp), do you have any questions?

Q: Actually, I'm just going to piggyback off of you. I want to know how are you -- where were you taking pictures from? Like, were you hiding like -- (inaudible)? How -- (inaudible)? It's hard for me to visualize. AIRMAN EPPS: Okay. So my -- the FOB was built on -- it had four different defensive walls, so there's the first defensive wall right here, so this is called the -- (inaudible) -- defensive wall, and I was on Delta wall which is -- (inaudible).

So the first defensive wall and then in between the defensive wall is a maintenance shop -- (inaudible) -- a whole bunch of (tools to build ?). And then the next wall up is my wall, Delta wall, which I was on, and then the FOB is surrounded by defensive walls which is Alpha wall, Bravo wall, and then the FOB also had security points where it's just towers where you go take pictures -- I mean, not take pictures, where you go make sure the area is safe.

So I was up here on Delta Two. We were getting shot at, but we had to stay low -- (inaudible) -- barriers, which is built out of mud and clay and rocks and all of that. And you just laid low. And my chief, he was -- he actually pulled me away. He told me I have to get down. So I'm hiding behind my chief and he's up shooting his weapon. And I have my camera and I'm like, I can't just sit here and not do anything -- (laughs) -- so I turned my camera on and I started taking steps. I just started taking pictures the whole entire time. I asked my chief could I go to the next defensive wall. He was like, no, Epps. I don't want you to go. And then I finally begged him, could I leave? And he was like, yes. I want you to leave. But he -- (inaudible) -- OK.

This is Delta One and this is Delta Two. And this is the defensive wall and it's filled with (tactical ?) barriers and so I ran. I did a low run all the way to the next defensive wall and my chief watched me the whole entire time. While I'm at Delta Two -- I mean, Delta Three, there's a Navy guy and an Air Force guy. They're in there. They see the enemy inside the mountains. They're calling me then on the radio to tell all the leadership that they see the enemy. Actually there were two JDAMs that dropped that day, too, on the mountains, which we were still getting small arms fire after the JDAMs dropped.

So I'm inside here, I'm like, I need to get down to where everybody is fighting the fire at. And I didn't want to go alone because I'm only -- I was only -- (inaudible). I had just turned a senior airman. So I was waiting for somebody to come along to come (hide ?) me down. So a Hm1, which is a corpsman inside the Navy E-6 -- a Hm1 came in there to assess everybody medically. Everybody was healthy and good. And I asked him could he come down to the fire with me. He was a little hesitant. He was like, Epps, why do you want to go down there? And I was like, I just need to. I need to get down there. And he was like, okay, Epps, I'll take you down there. So I made sure my chief didn't see me go -- (laughs, inaudible) -- wall, so I was running down there with my camera. I'm hiding behind the walls, I'm jumping into defensive positions and then I finally get down to the fire and it was just -- it was very chaotic. It was just complete chaos. I stayed that whole entire time. I helped people get fire extinguishers, shovels and stuff and I was still taking pictures the whole entire time.

Q: What was the cause of the fire, mortar rounds?

AIRMAN EPPS: Mortar rounds, they hit the fuel point. They blew up the whole entire fuel point. So all of the fire set the maintenance shed on fire. It set everything ablaze, all of our toilet tissue caught on fire. (Laughter, inaudible.) Yes. Yeah.

Q: Were there any close calls for you personally, mortar rounds and RPG rounds?

MS. EPPS: Close calls as in falling when I'd be trying to run to hide. I kind of fell a couple of times, but that was the only close calls I had.

Q: So when it was all done, what were you thinking? Were you able to -- I mean -- (inaudible) -- done that, or maybe -- (inaudible) -- or --

AIRMAN EPPS: Actually, I passed out and I had to get medical assessed and get an IV in me. It was overwhelming.

Q: (Inaudible.)

AIRMAN EPPS: Yes. It was very overwhelming. I couldn't believe that it had happened. And -- yeah. I couldn't believe that that happened.

Q: Were there any casualties from the --

AIRMAN EPPS: No, sir. No. Thank God.

Q: What does your family think about all of that? Did you tell them the whole story?

AIRMAN EPPS: No, ma'am. I did not so much. I did not so much.

Q: Now you can tell. (Laughter.)

Q: Well, did you have anything else to add on your story personally, or --

AIRMAN EPPS: (Inaudible.)

Q: Well, thanks so much for answering questions. Q: This is - (inaudible). While we're on this particular story, yesterday we talked a little bit about what your photographs were used for. Maybe that would be interesting if you haven't already covered that.

AIRMAN EPPS: Oh, yes. So my photos were used for base defense. It was used to capture the detainees, like all the people that were shooting at us. It was also used as proof to all the people that actually helped during the fight, so everybody that I had taken a picture of that was doing something, I submitted all of those photos and my commander reviewed everything and he awarded people accordingly.

Q: Wonderful. Okay.

SGT. ROY: Lieutenant Walker?

LT. WALKER: Okay. Thank you. Is there anybody else in the room that had a question?

SGT. ROY: Well, yeah. We're going to -- I was just going to go down the line as far as different people on the -- up on the panel.

LT. WALKER: Okay. Go ahead then. And then I'll just be standing by. We did not have the National Guard Bureau or the other blogger that was RSVPed join us on the line. So we'll go ahead and just take the room, and when you're done I'll follow up with the admin and then get the transcript ready or sent to you guys as soon as it comes in.

Q: Thanks so much. Major, thanks again for being here. You're -- from what I'm reading, anyway, (in the ?) AC-130. How long approximately were you on station during the firefight? About an hour?

MAJ. ASTROTH: Well, we were on station I'm not exactly sure how long. We covered until -- (inaudible) -- went off station, (received ?) fuel, came back on station around -- (inaudible) -- for five hours.

Q: What was the -- from your point of view, are you taking fire at this point? Are people up there firing at you, or do small arms reach your altitude or something like that?

MAJ. ASTROTH: In this particular case we were below -- we were in a valley -- (inaudible) -- above the aircraft, so there is a shot, or there was a chance we were being shot at. The effectiveness -- I don't know the -- (inaudible) -- that theory, I think.

Q: Talk a little bit about the perspective that AC-130 gunships have in this sort of fire-fire sort of situation. What -- (inaudible) -- obvious advantage that you're overhead, but what kind of sensors are on board, what kind of things help you -- help you help the people on the ground in this sort of situation? MAJ. ASTROTH: It's basic sensors. You can find that -- all the information off of Wikipedia. That's what we have. So we have two sensors -- ability to display -- (inaudible) -- that we can fire simultaneously at two different targets depending on the distance apart, we can fire -- (inaudible). That's how we were able to provide cover fire to -- (inaudible) -- evacuate from the target area while providing additional fire at the tree line across the valley about five clicks apart. So we were able to do that -- (inaudible).

Q: Do you -- can you actually -- do you actually have eyes on as far as the insurgent positions, or do you have like a controller on the ground talking to you as far as directing fire?

MAJ. ASTROTH: We had a controller on the ground advising us where he needed to do this. We don't -- well, we have the ability to engage independently, but in most cases we -- (inaudible) -- orchestrated out of -- (inaudible).

Q: What were some of the -- talk about some of the moments for you where you were -- sort of a critical moment in the firefight as far as -- (inaudible)?

MAJ. ASTROTH: Like Airman Epps said, training pretty much kicked in at that point. I was fortunate enough to have some incredible instructors and as far -- that prepared me for a moment like this, particularly Major -- (inaudible) -- was extremely hard on us going through training, and everything that (she ?) taught me paid off that night, from how many bullets we had, because we would have run out of ammunition -- we had to meter throughout how much fuel we have left up to -- (inaudible). If we run out of bullets before gas then we're not going to be able to provide cover. And then we had enough fuel to get us up to -- (inaudible) -- so that was also a factor on how far out -- (inaudible) -- progressing the situation far enough that we can get the helicopters moving before we run out of gas -- (inaudible).

So, critical points. Once this started it went full tilt until we were on the ground, so two hours maybe, two and a half hours.

Q: So -- (inaudible) -- AC-130. I'm -- a lot of my questions probably sound like -- (inaudible). So the -- so when we're talking

about the -- who are the -- that were actually on the ground that you were sort of covering fire for?

MAJ. ASTROTH: We covered multiple groups of people -- (inaudible) -- we have -- (inaudible).

Q: I have a question for you. We have a lot of, like, young airmen readers checking out our blog. I'm sure they want to know, what are the tips that you can get them? When you're in a tough situation, how do you think -- (inaudible) -- decisions to keep people safe?

MAJ. ASTROTH: For a young guy, like I mentioned, my instructor was extremely hard on me. The guys that -- everybody likes to watch movies and likes to perform like the hero, but you just don't do that out of the blue. The only way you're going to do that is through training and when the time comes, that's -- the switch in your mind flips, you fall back on your training and how you did during the training, that's how you're going to perform. If you're not pushed hard by your instructors in training, then you're not going to be able to reach your maximum potential in that case.

So, again, I was fortunate to have a very tough instructor to get me where I needed to go. And a lot of times you think, oh -- (inaudible) -- ability -- why do I need to be counting the number of rounds that go out of the aircraft? Especially on our training we do simulated situations where we're not actually firing out of the aircraft, we're pretending. That's got to do -- (inaudible) -- brand new guys with the aircraft -- (inaudible) -- why do I have to count the rounds leaving the airplane? And here I am in a situation where I have two hours of fuel left, I have this finite amount of rounds, and as far as I know it may take that full two hours, which it did, to get everyone out of the target area safely and I think we used 93 percent of our ammo, which we could have easily used all the ammo -- (inaudible) -- the airplane. Well, if you -- (inaudible) -- your airplane, there's still work to be done, well, guess what? (Inaudible) -- job.

So as far as I'm concerned 93, percent is -- (inaudible) -- perfect. So things like that for the young guys, your instructors -- they're not -- (inaudible) -- and you need to trust in all of that and try to do the best you can while you're in training.

Q: You mentioned that you're here representing your crew. Talk a little bit about them and how they performed that day and how they get you in the loop as far as what was going on in the aircraft and the gunships-- (inaudible).

MAJ. ASTROTH: And I am honored to be here on behalf of my crew because without my solid crew that night, there is no way that we -- (inaudible) -- what we did. Every member of the team from engineer to the copilot helping me with the radios and -- (inaudible) -- keeping track of rounds, everybody was working together to maintain fire on both sides of the valley. We were not only danger close with the friendly ground force, but we also danger close on both sides of the helicopter as we were coming down the mountain. And then the gunners -- I think we had

one gun malfunction, so switch from gun two and gun three to gun one and gun three while simultaneously correcting -- (inaudible) -- gun two and then they got it back online, because all that ammo had been (weighed ?) at that point. And they were able to fix it and we continued to fire. All that happening at the same time, guys -- (inaudible) -- the other aircraft, the F-15 -- (inaudible) -- together -- (inaudible) -- all that kind of stuff. That's all simultaneous, but there's no way one person could drag -- help the JTAG (ph) out and orchestrate all that by himself -- (inaudible).

SGT. ROY: Tiffany, anyone else on your social blogger side?

LT. WALKER: No.

SGT. ROY: Okay. Very good. Anyone else in the room? All right. Let's go on to our final portrait today.

Q: (Thank you, sir. I appreciate it ?). And talk a little bit about when you arrived on scene for that, that's obviously a big job, how did you coordinate that kind of an effort to evacuate that many people? Did you train for evacuating 230-odd people?

SGT. WARREN: You never train for, you know, something of that size. However, it's a like a consistent theme you're hearing here: it was a team effort. And it was a massive team effort. It wasn't just Air Force alone. We had airlift from the Army. We had an entire Guardian Angel team, which consists of combat rescue officers and pararescue members. We actually had two teams, our entire deployment team went on this rescue effort. We also had terminal air controllers on the ground to coordinate this massive ceiling of aircraft that were protecting us while it was happening. It was a big event. So I didn't act in any way alone on this.

And to get back on training, you know, we train for mass casualty. That's essentially our bread and butter. But you don't train for something of this scale. So it was -- it was difficult, but we go through some pretty difficult tasks to come to this point to become a pararescueman and even further to become specialized as a journeyman and et cetera. So you overcome adversity and make it happen and it only happens as a team.

Q: What were some of the -- there had to have been multiple problems or multiple points in the operation where you were like, okay, how are we going resolve this? What were some of the sticking points, obviously?

SGT. WARREN: I think first and foremost was crowd control. You know, you're presented with people that have been up there for hours in some pretty thin clothing, so you've got cold, frantic people who are armed. And, you know, essentially dealing with that initially, that takes a chunk of your team and then you have a series of avalanches that take out and bury alive people in buses, cars throughout this entire -- about 50 mile square radius and we're only covering a small portion of it.

So you send out a scout team to go recon the area and see the best we can do with the minimal we have, and that means getting walking wounded out and then triaging them, getting them to an aircraft, getting them back to base. You know, it was an unfortunate event, however, it happened so close to Bagram that we had quite a bit of airlift to be able to do shuttle runs for the walking wounded so we were able to concentrate on the more significantly injured.

So on this mountain path, which is about 11,000 feet, you know, you have some pretty significant drops in altitude and terrain. So there was buried -- there were three buried school buses filled with people, so essentially buried alive. So you could hear them and, you know, we had extrication tools and things like that to be able to get them out. And again, it was a massive team effort.

I was a small part to play in this.

Q: What were you thinking when you got to that kind of scene? Was it overwhelming?

SGT. WARREN: It was, but not to the point where you can't act. You know, you take a second and see just the scale of this thing and you're like, all right, I've got to do something. So, you know, I just act. But yes, initially it was a lot to take in.

Q: How did you -- since you were sort of on scene how did you communicate to people back at Bagram and other places, sort of supporting -- how did you communicate what was going on, or --

SGT. WARREN: We have a pretty good command structure on the ground coordinated by our officers and some of the controllers. And they did a great job corresponding back to base, letting them know things that we needed, supplies, et cetera, coordinating the medical teams to have a continuous response for these many bodies coming in and also coordinate Afghani support to take over the effort because we were really just an initial response. You know, it was pretty efficient.

Q: You got the buses out, right?

SGT. WARREN: We got as many people as we could out of them with the time that we had. You know, we were up there for quite a while. And, you know, being a team from Florida in Hindu Kush, you know, you have a limited window of operability up there. So, you know, we were able to recover quite a few people, but not all, just -- Afghans took over for the next few days but we were able to pull out, save a dozen or so people out of the buses and that was pretty rewarding.

Q: You know, obviously after the operation ramped up, what were you thinking about?

SGT. WARREN: We were pretty psyched about it. You know, something of that scale is not that -- it hasn't been done for quite some time since Katrina. It's every PJ's dream to be able to be a part of

something like that, so it was awesome. Seeing these guys essentially buried alive -- like -- you know, I grew up in Massachusetts where there was a lot of snow and my brothers buried me lots of times. It sucks. (Laughter.) You know, to be up there for 20 hours in essentially pajamas is no easy task. So to be able to get these people out was an awesome feeling and you could see it in their faces.

Q: One question. Do you think this has changed you, this experience?

SGT. WARREN: Well, I think it's -- on the work side of the house, it definitely changed how we do a lot of our tactics and techniques in terms of response for something of this scale. And it's helped just a ton with how I pack my kit, et cetera, and do my job. Personally it's, yes, something I look back on and I feel very fortunate to be a part of the team to accomplish this task. I mean, the support was amazing from the command all the way down to the medical support that we had.

SGT. ROY: Is that all you have? Lieutenant Walker, do we have any closing administrative points?

LT. WALKER: We do. Thank you all. We've had some great questions and comments here. I know I personally enjoyed listening to the three stories that we've had on the panel and look forward to reading more in the newest "Portraits in Courage."

As we need to wrap up today, I'd like to ask, does anyone have any final comments?

OK. Then today's program will be available online at dodlive.mil, where you'll be able to access a story based on today's call along with source documents such as this audio file and the print transcript. Again, thank you to the men and women of "Portraits in Courage" and our participants in the room and on the call today. This concludes today's event. Feel free to disconnect at this time. Goodbye.

END.